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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NOUAKCHOTT 000155

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: SLIPPERY AS EVER, OULD DAHDAH STILL IN TOUCH WITH
HCE

REF: NOUAKCHOTT 00126

Classified By: Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Cornelius Walsh for rea
sons 1.4 (b) and
(d).

11. (C) Summary: RFD President Ahmed Ould Daddah informed Poloff he asked the National Assembly to postpone a February 19 vote to February 22 on key election-related issues and threatened an RFD boycott if he were denied. For the regime sponsored June 6 elections, Ould Dahdah demanded suffrage for Mauritanian expatriates, greater transparency in the creation of the National Independent Election Council (CENI). When informed of his request's refusal, Ould Daddah ordered RFD members to leave the session. After this setback, he stressed, now he really would oppose the regime. Dahdah had a hard time squaring his earlier condemnation of the June 6 process with his party's participation in electoral details and glossed over the transparency of the RFD gambit to set the vote for the 22nd. He repeated his ritual denunciation of Abdahllahi with an ever so slight modification and hinted that if worse came to worse, he just might have to save the regime from itself. Nothing concrete except the modulated nuance regarding the President, but a prima performance by one of Mauritania's finest political chameleons. End Summary.

Three Law Projects, One Suspect Strategy

12. (C) In a February 19 meeting at RFD headquarters, Ahmed Ould Daddah discussed the RFD strategy for three election-related issues before the National Assembly. Ould Daddah explained that the Assembly was scheduled to vote that afternoon on suffrage for Mauritians abroad; the creation of CENI (an independent commission to organize and monitor elections); and the presidential elections. He stated that his party had asked the Assembly to postpone the February 19 vote until February 22 and that the RFD intended to boycott if this were denied. When asked about the reason for this, he did not elaborate. (Comment: Given the 2/20 Paris consultative meeting, deferral to the 22nd would allow the RFD to adjust its position with a better reading of the

regime's strength or weakness. End comment.) Ould Daddah then stressed that if the Assembly rescheduled, RFD intended to vote in favor of the Mauritians abroad and the CENI projects -- if certain amendments were passed -- but would reject the presidential election initiative.

13. (C) Ould Daddah was eager to justify his decision to collaborate in the vote. Since 1992, his party has pressed for an expatriate suffrage law. Expatriates can't be threatened as can domestics and there are enough expats to shift polls. He added that RFD would vote for the CENI only if the Assembly would accept an RFD amendment calling for broadly based participation in selecting members. He also wanted an amendment guaranteeing that CENI would have autonomy in organizing, managing, and announcing the vote.

14. (C) Poloff pointed out that RFD support of preparative measures for the June 6 election could be perceived as support for the elections themselves. Of course not, he responded, these measures were, by themselves, good for Mauritania and would ensure future free and transparent elections. He also reiterated RFD would vote against the June 6 election plan. He added that "unlike Americans, I do not see the world in black and white." When asked whether he thought, given the crisis, this was an appropriate time to focus on electoral laws, he responded that Aziz had agreed to allow those laws to be voted by the National Assembly as a way to lure RFD into accepting the June 6 elections. He added that allowing the president of the senate to lead the

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transition was a concession by Aziz to him. Comment: Neither the contradiction nor the understanding that he was still dickering with the Junta seemed to faze Dahdah. While there's a certain logic in building an electoral system through which the RFD might profit if circumstances changed to "force" it into the polls, Dahdah's earlier condemnations of the June 6 plan hardly seemed to matter. End comment.

15. (C) Ould Daddah then phoned to find out if his request to reschedule the session had been granted. He looked upset and told Poloff the answer had been negative and he had asked his party members to boycott the session. Poloff asked him about next steps and he responded "I will oppose this government by all possible means."

Getting Closer to FNDD

16. (C) When asked Ould Daddah about a possible compromise with FNDD, Ould Daddah said he would never accept a military candidacy or President Abdallahi's return, unless Abdallahi returned to resign, opening the way for the President of the Senate to lead the transition. Comment: Dahdah has been consistent up to now on one issue: Abdahllahi is not a legitimate president and therefore has no role in any settlement. His nod towards a nanosecond's legitimacy for resignation purposes is, for him, a tectonic shift. This coupled with Abdahllahi's letter to the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) which in itself registered a shift in the Presidential camp's position, may see a compromise worked out. (see reftel). End comment.

Open to Dialogue

17. (C) Poloff solicited his opinion about the declaration released by Colonel Ely Vall's frontman Mahfoudh Ould Bettah February 18. The letter, signed by important political figures, called for the HCE (singling out General Aziz by name), the FNDD, and the RFD to come to the table and negotiate. Ould Daddah said he was open to dialogue and he

had a meeting scheduled that afternoon with Cheick Sid'Ahmed Ould Babamine, chairman of the previous CENI and signatory of the letter. Nevertheless, he said he felt uneasy as Ely Vall is corrupt and should not be in politics.

18. (C) Daddah backpedaled and intimated that if the FNDD refused a compromise in the next few months, he might be open to negotiations with the military to find a solution without the FNDD. Poloff asked him if this meant running in elections organized by the military and he said it did not. He stated he wanted a transition led by a national consensus government with the power to replace government officials named by the military. He would be willing to accept the military staying on to ensure security. Comment: Daddah may be thinking that in a few months, if Aziz is unable to legitimize his government, he will be amenable to negotiation. Ould Daddah could then become the military's candidate. End comment.

Curious About European and US Positions

19. (C) Ould Daddah asked Poloff if the Americans remained firm in their position. He also wanted to know if she had any information about the outcome of the 18 February EU meetings "to harmonize European policy". He looked irked when she said she did not. He stated a French source had told him "they did not see how the EU could do less than the

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AU." Ould Daddah said it would be a big mistake for the French to accept Aziz's plan as it would not bring stability to the region. He concurred that a less than strong EU response would undermine the AU and "tell Africans that democracy was good for Europeans but not for them." Note: Ould Daddah is traveling to Paris this weekend to lobby the Europeans. End note.

18. (C) Comment: RFD's boycott of the National Assembly vote further highlights the falling out between Aziz and Ould Daddah. Nevertheless, our eyebrows rise when we realize he must be in fairly constant contact with the Junta to lobby back and forth on the electoral law itself. The ever so slight shift to accepting an Abdahllahi resignation is his first hint at any flexibility towards the presidential camp and comes with his own criticism of the FNDD for its "loyalty" to the President. Drawing a bead on Dahdah's position is difficult, but perhaps, just perhaps, he sees a train moving and doesn't want to be left on the platform. End comment.
HANKINS